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## **Five Phases Belief in Chu 楚: Sacrificing White Dogs to Save the Kingdom?**

### **Abstract:**

This paper is a corpus-based study on excavated bamboo-slip inscriptions from Chu state around 700 BCE. -300 BCE. It examines in detail a particular sacrifice made of white dogs and the historical and religious contexts for this ritual. The results show that this occult practice was performed as part of the five-god ritual system of Chu state. In the ritual Chu people singled out white dogs as appropriate sacrifice because in their belief, the energy flow from white dogs were able to destroy Chu state. The whole idea was based on the Five Phases theory, which served as a logical foundation for many cultural practices and social custom in early China.

**Key words:** White dog sacrifice, five phases theory, Chu Bamboo-slip Inscriptions, five-god ritual system

### **Introduction**

“Offering on the road a white dog, wine, and food as sacrifice,” reads a bamboo strip

from Chu state (770BCE.-223 BCE.) in ancient China.<sup>1</sup> The same sentence or sentence structure with a dog (usually white) in it, recurs frequently in other bamboo slips from this time. For example, on bamboo slip No. 229 from Bao-shan Mountain, it reads: “making a sacrifice with a white dog, wine, and food” (Figure 2). Bamboo slip No. 233 says: “making sacrifice with a white dog, wine and food, killing the white dog at the main gate” (Figure 3).

Bamboo-slip inscriptions (hereafter BSI) are one of the earliest types of written Chinese.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, BSI have been unearthed from multiple ancient tombs, creating successive archeological sensations in China. For a long period in the history of ancient China (11 BCE. -7 BCE.), bamboo and wooden slips were the main writing materials before the invention of paper. Bamboo was first cut and then processed to make slips. Each slip was written on using a writing brush and black ink, forming one line of 10 to 40 Chinese characters, from top to bottom. Because the bulk of extant BSI were found convergently in tombs from Chu 楚 time, they are also called Chu bamboo-slip inscriptions (CBSI). Most of them are historical records and documents about the local religion, governmental proceedings, law administration, etc. They tell much of the life in the days of Chu state.

Chu was one of the most important of the small states contending for power in China between 770 and 223 BCE, until it was defeated by a stronger state of Qin 秦. According to archaeological findings, wood plays a distinctly special role in Chu’s culture. Large number of wooden objects and wood carvings were listed among Chu burial offerings, showing the value

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<sup>1</sup> Bamboo-slip inscriptions from Bao-shan Chu tomb, No.208. See Figure 1. All the figures are from Hubeisheng Jingsha tielu kaogudui 湖北省荆沙鐵路考古隊 *Baoshan Chujian* 包山楚簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Before that, Chinese characters were carved on tortoise shells and ox scapula, also known as oracle bone inscriptions; or on bronze vessels, also known as bronze inscriptions.

of wood at least in the funerary ritual. The reason for this could be linked to Chu people's belief in the Five Phases theory. The theory is a complicated construction, based on early Chinese cosmological and philosophical thoughts, to explain how the Universe, including the human world, works. At the core lies the conception that five fundamental elements<sup>3</sup>—Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water—constitute the whole universe and everything in it. Each existence is usually predominated by one of the five elements and may thus be categorized accordingly. For example, spring season is associated with the Wood element, while autumn is Metal. White color is linked to Metal and black is to Water. Under this theory, Chu state is associated, through some esoteric connections, with the Wood element. To eyes of a general audience, the associations appear to be arbitrary and unconceivable. This is because the whole Five Phases theory is so complex a network that its categorization of this world is sometimes elusive. But to an informed eye, each strand intertwines with the other and carries a full load of rich connotations.<sup>4</sup>

Reading through the CBSI (Chu bamboo-slip inscriptions), one would constantly meet a sentence like the one in the beginning paragraph: “offering on the road a white dog, wine, and food as sacrifice.” Below is some statistics about the occurrences of this formulaic structure in the major CBSI, evidencing the existence of a pattern. In this paper I will analyze three intriguing questions, namely, dog sacrifice in the Chu time; the performance of the ritual where dogs were sacrificed; and the special importance of white dogs (and not black or brown dogs)

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<sup>3</sup> The English word "element" has a somewhat fixed connotation that is not present with the Chinese. Hence the theory is often known, more accurately, as the Five Transformations or Five Phases.

<sup>4</sup> More information about this theory can be found in the later sections.

in this ritual.

Tomb Names	Occurrences
Bao-shan	6
Ge-ling	3
Wang-shan	2

Table 1. The occurrences of “white dog sacrifice” in CBSI.

## Dog as a sacrificial animal

Many transmitted texts from Pre-Qin time (2100 BCE. -221 BCE.) have shown that dogs were a sacrificial animal in early China.<sup>5</sup> Killing or dismembering dogs in a certain rite or ritual was a common scene at that time. For example, *Fengsu tongyi* (風俗通義), an encyclopedic work on folk customs and legends before the Eastern Han dynasty (189-220 C.E.), mentions specifically this antique practice. Under the entry “殺狗磔邑四門” (killing and dismembering dogs at four city gates) , it remarks by citing “Yueling” [from *Liji* 禮記]:

“at the nine gates animals are torn in pieces in deprecation (of the danger): to secure the full development of the (healthy) airs of the spring.” ...Dog as an animal

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<sup>5</sup> For more details about this practice, see Yuan Jinping 袁金平 “Cong Chuwenzi ziliao kan xian Qin shiqi de shagou xisu” 从楚文字资料看先秦时期的杀狗习俗. *The Journal of Ancient Civilizations* 古代文明(7), no. 3 (2013): 74-77.

is associated with the Metal element. Deprecation means to ward off. Repressing the Metal so that it would not harm creatures that are born in spring, in this way all things will be allowed to develop their nature... That is what it means by “to secure the full development of the (healthy) airs of the spring.” After accomplishing all this, the phase of Wood comes to an end.

《月令》：“九門磔禳，以畢春氣。”……犬者、金畜，禳者、卻也。抑金使不害春之時所生，令萬物遂成其性....故曰「以畢春氣」。功成而退，木行終也。

As stated in the paragraph above, the rationale behind this whole occult dog sacrifice in ancient China was mainly the Five Phases theory.<sup>6</sup> It further provides us with at least three important facts about this practice: 1. Dogs were killed for warding off potential dangers or diseases; 2. The sacrifice was usually offered at doors or city gates; 3. Dog was associated with the Metal element,<sup>7</sup> which would harm or destroy the Wood element in the Five Phases theory.

People in ancient times believed that there existed unseen evil spirits in the air, whose incursion into the human body or the state (through the city gate) would cause diseases and disasters, such as plagues and conflicts. In order to ward off these vicious spirits and maintain health and security, ancient people developed certain rituals which took dogs as appropriate

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<sup>6</sup> About how popular and pervasive this theory is in all aspects of life, at both the macro level and the micro level at that time, see Donald Harper, *Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical argument in ancient China* (Open Court Pub Co, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> In today's Five Phases theory, dog is associated with Earth, but the Five phase theory as a practical cultural tool is not static and unchanging from its birth. It has been developing and changing over time. In the early stage, dog was linked to Metal. This is further confirmed by all the evidences in 《呂氏春秋·孟秋紀》《呂氏春秋·仲秋紀》《周禮·庖人》 and 《風俗通義·祀典》.

sacrifice. But what were those rituals actually, especially for Chu people? Were they designed to worship a certain god or gods? If so, did it lead to the fact that dogs were always sacrificed at doors or city gates? CBSI examples will provide us a better understanding of these questions.

## **Door-god in the Five God Ritual**

According to all the CBSI examples, the rituals sacrificing dogs were conducted either at doors or gates. For example,

“Making sacrifice on the road with a white dog, wine, and food.”

賽於行一白犬、酒食 (BSI from Baoshan Mountain, No.208)

“Making a sacrifice on the road with a white dog, wine, and food.”

舉禱行一白犬、酒食 (BSI from Baoshan Mountain, No.229)

“Making sacrifice with a white dog, wine and food, killing the white dog at the main gate.”

舉禱行一白犬、酒食，闕於大門一白犬 (BSI from Baoshan Mountain, No. 233)

“Making sacrifice on the road by the palace with a white dog”

舉禱宮行一白犬 (BSI from Wang Mountain, No. 28)

More detailed information about this ritual practice was transmitted in these almost formulaic sentences from the divination texts in the CBSI. The dogs were killed particularly on the road or at the gate. The high frequency of the co-occurrence of dog sacrifice and these specific places in CBSI implies that the place of the divinatory practice is no less important than the object of the sacrifice. The road or gateway must be relevant to the ritual in some way

as well as the white dog.

Similar examples are pervasive in other CBSIs. For example, on some excavated slips from the Chu tomb at Geling in Xincai 新蔡葛陵楚簡, there are the following inscriptions:

“Offer sacrifice with a lamb in the house, and a dog on the road...”

就祷户一羊，就祷行一犬 (Gelin, Tomb 1, Series 3, No. 56)

“Offer sacrifice with a ewe in the house, and a dog on the road.”

就祷门、户屯一牂；就祷行一犬 (Gelin, Tomb 2, Series 3, No. 28)

According to Yang Hua, a custom of worshipping five gods “五祀” (five sacrifices) in early China was evidenced in these sentences.<sup>8</sup> It was a smaller ritual system in comparison with “七祀” (seven sacrifices), which was the sole prerogative of the ruler and his high-ranking ministers. Deities in seven sacrifices were gods of supreme authority and importance, like the Father God or the High God (*shangdi* 上帝), who was the ruler of the heavens. Officials ranking lower in the political hierarchy or commoners had the access to five sacrifices, which were offered to five deities. Different from the seven deities, those five deities were ordinary or low-ranking gods who had close connections with people’s everyday life, such as the door-god 門神 and the kitchen-god 灶神.<sup>9</sup> These gods protected the worshippers from deceases and disasters and required animal sacrifices in the rituals.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Yang Hua 楊華, “‘Wusi’ jidao yu chuhan wenhua de jicheng” “五祀” 祭祷与楚汉文化的继承. *Jiang Han luntan* 江汉论坛 9 (2004): 95-101. Reprint in *Xian Qin, Qin Han shi* 1(2005): 58-64.

<sup>9</sup> As to which specific five gods they actually were, there are still controversies around it. Different times and different areas had different gods, but the number five had not changed.

<sup>10</sup> For more discussions on this topic, see Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), chapter 4.

Yang Hua's assumption is further confirmed by the archaeological discovery of five wooden tablets in Baoshan Chu tomb. (Figure 4) Wooden tablets usually represent deities or diseased ancestors in Chinese tradition of ancestral worshipping. The unearthed five tablets were each inscribed with the names of five gods, corresponding to the five gods prevailing in the CBSI: 戶 (window) 灶 (kitchen) 室 (residence room) 門 (door/gate) 行 (residence walkways/ road).

Considering dog sacrifices were offered invariably on the road or at doors, they could have been part of the five-god ritual system, particularly dedicated to the door-god or the road-god. An understanding of the mechanism can be gained through Constance Cook's description of the exorcism ritual for worshipping the Earth God in Chu state:

To cure the patient of illness, the inside space had to be cleared of malign spirits all the way to the gate. To exorcise the demons from the space closest to the patient, his bedroom, the ritualists first sacrificed to the Earth God of the Residence, then moved outward to the spirits of the walkway up to the Great Gate (damen).<sup>11</sup>

## **White dog sacrifice and five phases belief of Chu state**

With all been discussed, the core question remains: why were white dogs, but not dogs in other colors, targeted for sacrifice? All the examples provided by the CBSI here highlight that the dogs have to be white. This is rarely mentioned in BSI from other areas or from other time.

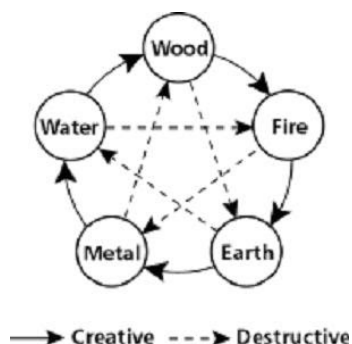
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<sup>11</sup> Constance A. Cook, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man's Journey* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 70.



Did white dogs have some special meanings for the Chu people?

It is proposed here that the answer is rooted in the popular Five Phases belief in Chu state. As Cook has suggested, “a summary of the religious activity...suggests a basic sensitivity by Baoshan ritualists to Five Phases requirements.”<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, the theory holds that the whole Universe is constituted by five basic elements. Of particular note is that in its view the Universe and its functioning is cyclical and interactive; each phase of an element characterizes a stage in this cyclical process. Below is a graphic representation of the theory.



As shown in the picture above, two distinct order sequences are involved. The clockwise sequence in the circle represents the creative cycle. In this order, each element enables or assists the next. For example, water nourishes wood, wood generates fire, the ashes fertilize the earth, etc. The other order, in a pentagon pattern with dotted lines, is the destructive cycle. The interaction between each element in this order may have a destructive force, for example, wood breaks up earth (such as roots; or soil erosion from trees), earth dams (or blocks) water, water extinguishes fire, fire melts metal, and metal (such as an ax) chops wood.

The destructive cycle echoes back, and is further supported by, *Fengsu tongyi*'s explanation of dog sacrifices at the nine city gates in spring season. Killing dogs (Metal) on both practical

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<sup>12</sup> Cook, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man's Journey*, 92.

and symbolic levels would decimate the Metal element, thus allowing the Wood element (the spring season, or the Chu state) to flourish.

As shown in table 2, white color is associated with Metal, so a white dog is thus doubly associated with the Metal element. If the energy flow from white dogs was believed to be able to destroy the Chu state, it is therefore not a coincidence that dogs that were white in color were singled out as the only breed for sacrifice by the Chu people. Only does wood (i.e., the Chu kingdom) survive by destroying metal (i.e. white dogs). By killing white dogs, Chu people were taking a preemptive action against their opposing force. In modern people’s mind, this sounds like a superstition, but it was firmly believed by ancient Chinese and has exerted strong and profound influences on many aspects of the society and culture. For example, over a millennium later, the name of the last native Chinese dynasty, Ming (blazing brightness)—which is associated with the fire element—was replaced by the conquerors with the word “Qing” (pure water), as water extinguishes fire. In the ancient Chinese belief system, this was not superstition but a matter of life and death.

<b>Element</b>	<b>Wood</b>	<b>Fire</b>	<b>Earth</b>	<b>Metal</b>	<b>Water</b>
<b>Color</b>	green	red	yellow	<b>white</b>	black
<b>State</b>	<b>Chu</b>	Jin	Zhou	Qin	Han
<b>Animal</b>	tiger	horse	sheep	<b>dog</b>	rat

Table 2. The nature of certain things in Five Phases theory.

## **Conclusions**

It can be concluded that the Five Phases belief stands as the most fundamental and significant factor in all the possible reasons for Chu people to choose white dogs as sacrifice. There could be other reasons, however, given how popular and influential this belief was at that time, it is the most plausible one. It is also supported by evidence from both transmitted texts and archeological findings. The case study of white dog inscriptions in CBSIs display not only how this belief dominated the religious lives of Chu people, but also many facets of the daily lives of a by-gone people living in that particular state in ancient China. In this sense, rather than simple characters and symbols, CBSIs also reflect and constitute an integral part of the historical, religious, and social milieu that created them.

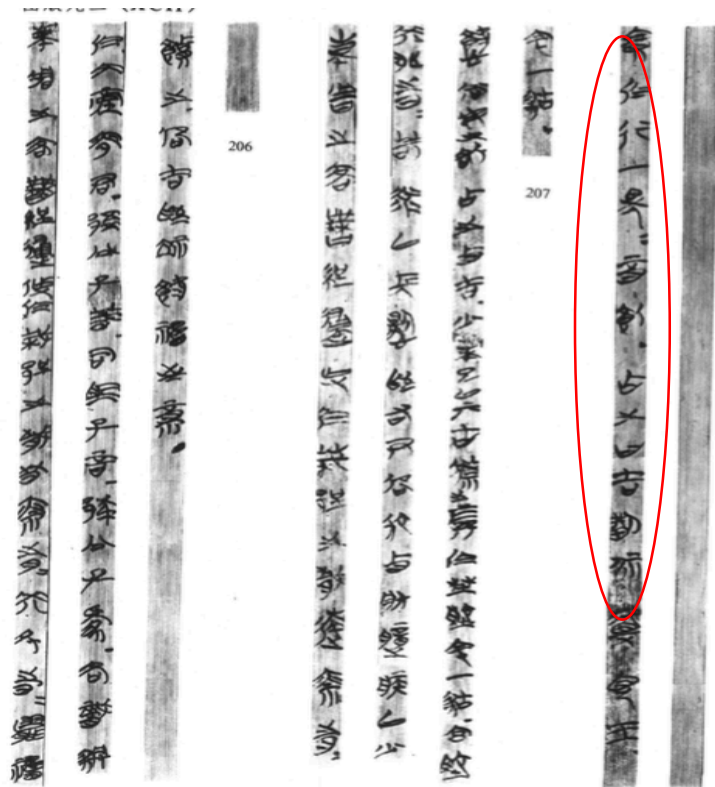


Figure 1 Bamboo slip No. 208 from Bao-shan Mountain



Figure 2 Bamboo slip No. 229 from Bao-shan Mountain.

图版一〇二 (CII)

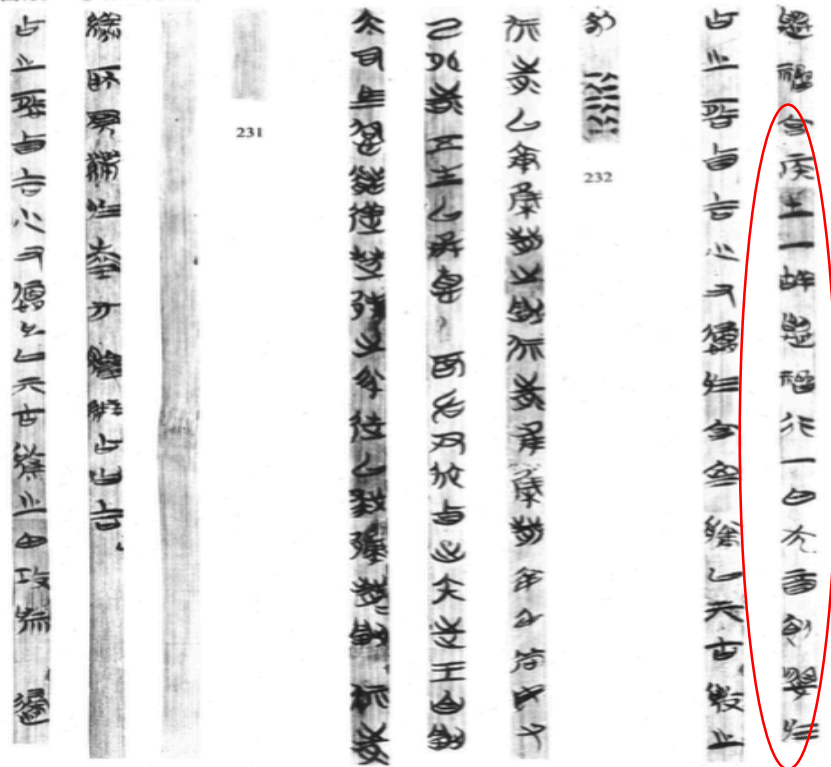


Figure 3 Bamboo slip No. 233 from Bao-shan Mountain.



Figure 4 Five wooden tablets from Baoshan tomb. The third from the left reads 門 “door”; the last one reads 行 “road”.

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